

# What to Do When Your Child is Stealing

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## Introduction: My Child, the Thief

One of the more common problems that we as parents encounter, but that nobody likes to talk about, is what to do when your child steals. There are a number of different reasons a child steals and a number of different ways to handle the problem.

Young children do not steal. Children below the age of four or five do not have a concept of ownership. They do not understand that it is wrong to take things that belong to others.

By the time a child enters elementary school, he should know that stealing is wrong. Often children at this age take things because they lack self-control.

A preteen or teen may steal for the thrill of it or because that is what friends are doing. He may be trying to gain a feeling of control over his life or to fill an emotional void.

Whatever the reason a child is stealing, the parents need to approach the problem with wisdom. If the parents just react according to their natural inclination, their response will almost certainly be wrong and destructive.

## Why a Child Steals

### 1-Child Can't Control Himself

Younger children have difficulty with self-control. A child may take something although he knows that stealing is wrong simply because he can't help himself. You have to give your child the ability to get what he wants in an honest way. Also, you must try to minimize the temptation.

## **2-Child's basic needs are not being met**

Children are completely dependent on their parents for all of their needs. A child who feels that his needs are not being met will eventually take the matter into his own hands. The easiest way for a child to do this is to take what he needs.

What a person needs is subjective. Even though a parent may not feel that a child should have something, it might be a real need for the child. For example, if the child's school friends have pocket money, then your child could have a need for pocket money. He will feel a lack if he doesn't have it, even if you provide him with everything that he wants. This type of child may be tempted to steal money just so he has money like everybody else.

## **3-Child Needs More Attention**

Probably the most common reason that children steal is that they feel an emotional lack in their lives. A child who does not have his emotional needs met, feels empty inside. He may take things in an attempt to fill the void. Often children who steal are lonely or having trouble in school or with friends. They lack the tools or the opportunity to express their feelings.

Many children do not get the attention they need. Such a child may feel unloved or that the parents are not interested in him. This may or may not be true. As I explain in [How to Improve Your Child's Behavior](#), how your child perceives your attention is more important than the amount of attention that you give. These children may translate their emotional needs into material desires. Stealing is their way for these children to express their discontent and to seek gratification.

## **4-Child Needs to Have Control over His Life**

Children are acutely aware of their vulnerability. They lack control over their lives. Some children have difficulty with this. If the child has trouble feeling dependant, he may steal to gain a sense of control or to rebel.

## **5-Peer Pressure**

Older children are pulled after what their friends do. If the child is with a group of children that feel stealing is exciting, the child may steal to be part of the group. Sometimes, a child may steal to show bravery to friends. If your child has fallen into a group of bad friends there are some very concrete things you can do to address the problem. See the article [What to Do When Your Teen Chooses Bad Friends](#).

# **What to Do When You Suspect Your Child is Stealing**

## **1-Stay Calm**

Don't overreact. When a child steals it does not mean that he is a thief or is headed for a life of crime. It is really no different than any of mistake that your child makes.

## **2-Do not Take it personally**

Children steal to get attention. If your child is stealing from you and you take it as a personal attack you are reinforcing the reason the child stole.

## **3-Do Not Accuse or Confront Your Child**

This point must be stressed. You must catch your child in the act so that the situation speaks for itself.

You can never challenge your child with circumstantial evidence. Either the child will lie and you will reinforce his dishonesty or he will confess. If he tells the truth and you punish him, you will be teaching him that it pays to lie. Either way you are stuck. Circumstantial evidence won't do.

Hearing that your child stole from a third party won't do. If your child denies it, then you are forced to believe your child. If you don't, then you will show your child that you don't trust him. Nothing encourages a child to be dishonest more than knowing that his parents don't trust him. If the child confesses, you will not be able to punish him.

Even if you are 99% sure your child is stealing that is not good enough to accuse him. For example, say that you look in your purse and the brand new \$50 you took out from the bank yesterday is missing. You put your child's laundry away and you find hidden among his things your brand new \$50. You did not catch your child. Maybe someone else also lost a new \$50 bill and he found it. Maybe your \$50 fell out of your purse and your child found it on the street. Unless you see your child reach into your purse and take out the \$50 you did not see him steal.

## **4-Make Sure that Your Child Knows What He Did is Wrong**

This is particularly true of a younger child.

## **What to Do When You Catch Your Child**

Don't ask the child for explanations. Merely state that he is not allowed to take things from other people. Do not sermonize. Just use simple explanations.

"Stealing is wrong. You would not want anyone to take your toy. So it's wrong for you to take this toy."

Never imply that your child is bad. Stealing is bad, not the child. Do not call your child a thief, dishonest, or a liar or any other name that you do not want him to become. When you give your child a label, he will grow to fill that label.

## **Correcting the Wrong**

### **If Your Child Stole From Someone outside the Family**

Your child must make restitution. If your child stole from a store or from a neighbor, then see that he returns the object. Have your child apologize and say he or she will never do it again. You should accompany your child to make it easier for him to correct the damage.

### **If Your Child Stole Money from You**

Estimate what child took and make it clear that the child must pay you back. He may do this by helping around the house for money. You should pay him enough that he pays off his debt in about a month. Say to him that you realize he needs more money and give him an allowance or increase in allowance.

### **Hide Temptation**

Don't leave money around where the child can find it. Tell his siblings that you are going to watch their money for a while. Don't tell them why. Don't send this child to the store to buy something with a large bill where there will be a lot of change.

## **Putting the Incident into the Past**

### **Figure out Why Your Child Stole**

If he needs more attention make a special effort to give it to him. If he needs to feel more control over his life, give him an increase in allowance and more freedom to spend it as he wishes. If he needs certain things to be part of his peer group, make sure that he gets them.

### **Continue to Trust Your Child**

If your child is stealing it does not mean he is bad or he is a thief. You don't want your reaction to make him become that way. Your child will fulfill your expectations of him. If you view him as a thief, bad, or dishonest he will grow into that label.

### **Be a Model of Honesty**

Children learn by watching their parents. You should show concern about the property rights of others. A parent who brings office supplies home or boasts about a mistake at the supermarket checkout counter, teaches his child that honesty is not important.

## **Conclusion**

Stealing is a common problem. You should view it like any other mistake your child makes. It is something that has to be corrected, but it is not more than that. If you handle it properly, you can correct this problem quickly and easily.